Cobbwebs
News and Views

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# ELIZABETH KNIPE COBBOLD – GEORGIAN GEOLOGIST

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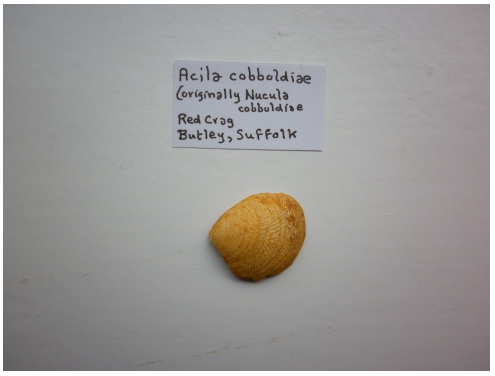
Our publication *Elizabeth Cobbold – Georgian Polymath* by Adele Mallen in 2019 has been followed by a hugely interesting article titled *Elizabeth Knipe Cobbold – Georgian Geologist* by **Caroline & Bob Markham** in the 2020 volume of *Transactions of the Suffolk Naturalists' Society*. It is a long and quite technical article but it throws so much light on Elizabeth Cobbold's early contribution to Suffolk's Geology that we could not let it pass without even this brief little commentary.

*A Young Elizabeth Cobbold of Holywells*

It tells us that **Elizabeth (1765-1824) #58** on the web family tree collected and identified fossils from Suffolk Crag deposits (for the most part from what is now known as Red Crag) in the early nineteenth century. Her specimens were first published by **James Sowerby** of London in his *Mineral Conchology* from 1813. This is more than 200 years ago, 8 years before the first paper on **Mary Anning's** specimens was published by the Geological Society of London and 46 years before **Charles Darwin's** *On the Origin of the Species* was published. She was a contemporary of pioneering palaeontologists **Gideon Mantell** and **Georges Cuvier.** Such early scientific endeavour deserves to be recorded and celebrated.




*Acila cobboldiae*

In 1791 she married, as his second wife, **'Big' John Cobbold (1746-1835)**, a prominent Ipswich brewer, which gave her the money and the contacts to progress her scientific ambitions. She was introduced to **James Edward Smith** of Norwich, a founder and first president of the Linnaean Society in London in 1788. In 1793 James Smith arranged for her to receive the first part of his *Flora Anglica* to which she had contributed summer snowflake and meadow-saffron.

In 1810 Elizabeth's paper 'On the Fasciola Hepatica' (concerning a liver fluke) was read (not by her, as women were not allowed) to the Linnaean Society. Story has it that it was received with some scepticism but later found to be entirely accurate. From 1814 until her death 10 years later Elizabeth exchanged discoveries and specimens with all the pioneering palaeontologists of the day most of her specimens coming from the Holywells estate to which the family had moved in 1814.

It is clear from correspondence held in the Suffolk Record Office that her contribution was much appreciated, evidenced by her being termed 'a kind friend of science' by James Sowerby who named her fossil bivalve shell from Holywells *Nucula cobboldiae* in volume 2 of *Mineral Conchology* in 1817. It was placed in the genus nucula because of the tooth and socket arrangement of its hingeline. Later

palaeontologists placed these nuculas with a zig-zag pattern on the surface of the shell in a new genus, *Acila*. Although Elizabeth's shell is now placed in a different genus it retains James Sowerby's name *cobboldiae* and it is the same shell. James Sowerby died in 1822 but his son, **James de Carle Sowerby** continued his father's publication in which he lamented Palaeontology's loss when Elizabeth died in 1824